

Culture and Foster Care Review: An Overview and Position Statement*

I. Purpose

Foster care review is a quality improvement tool to monitor and improve the outcomes for children in foster care and to provide crucial data on children and families in care, identify service gaps and describe the impact of service strategies to the overall quality assurance system.

Foster care review provides independent analysis of information about an individual child's safety, permanency and functioning. This analysis leads to the development of findings and recommendations for all essential participants which contribute to achievement of improved outcomes for the child. Review also provides independent analysis of a system's performance, including emerging trends, strengths, barriers and the effectiveness of interventions.

The purpose of this paper is to serve as a resource and guide for all committees, subcontractors and participants in the development of EQUIP tools, products and policies, ensuring cultural responsiveness and sensitivity.

Cross-cultural misunderstandings, perceptions, biases, attitudes and institutional racism may play an integral role at every step in the child welfare process and in the review of foster care cases and are barriers to the achievement of positive outcomes for children in care.

II. Definitions

Bias: Preference or inclination that inhibits impartial judgment; prejudice.

Compassion: The deep feeling of sharing the suffering of another in the inclination to give aid or support, or to show mercy.

Cultural Responsiveness: A set of congruent system, agency and individual practice skills, attitudes, policies and structures that promotes positive interaction between individuals, families and communities and is effective in the context of cultural differences.

Culture: The integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thought, speech and actions; the customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of a racial, religious, social group or class as seen through an individual's perceptual lens.

Empathy: Understanding so intimate that the feelings, thoughts and motives of one are readily comprehended by another.

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Adapted from *Individual Foster Care Case Review Guidelines*, National Association of Foster Care Reviewers, 1997.

Ethnicity: The condition of belonging to a particular group within a cultural and social system that claims or is accorded special status on the basis of complex, often variable traits including religious, linguistic, ancestral or physical characteristics.

Listen: To apply oneself to hearing something; to pay attention and consider; give heed.

Prejudice: An adverse judgment or opinion formed beforehand or without knowledge or examination of the facts; irrational suspicion or hatred of a particular group, race or religion.

Race: A local geographic or global human population distinguished as a more or less distinct group by genetically transmitted physical characteristics; any group of people united or classified together on the basis of common history, nationality or geographic distribution.

Respect: To feel or show esteem or honor; willingness to show consideration or appreciation.

Responsiveness: The ability to effectively, readily react to suggestions, influences, appeals, efforts and needs.

Trust: Firm reliance on the integrity, ability or character of a person or thing; confident belief; faith.

The terms culture, race and ethnicity have different meanings, yet are often used interchangeably when discussing the need to make child welfare service delivery systems responsive to the needs of diverse children and families. The majority of the field's research has focused on the disparity in outcomes for children of different races; however, it is difference, whether based on skin color, religion, customs or language, that impacts the type, quality and outcomes of services offered to children in foster care and their families.

III. Overview of Literature on Race and Child Welfare Services

Demographics of United States by Race and by Age; by Children in Care by Race and by Age

A recent review of child welfare research suggests that children of color and their families are over-represented in the system, experience poorer outcomes and receive fewer services than their Caucasian counterparts. However, the relationship between race and the outcomes of child welfare services is confounded by the relationship between other factors related to poor child welfare outcomes (poverty, substance abuse, region). Even with these factors considered, the literature suggests a pattern of inequity, if not discrimination, based on race and ethnicity in the provision of child welfare services (Courtney, et al., 1996).

Outcomes in Out-of-home Care

- Prevalence rates for out-of-home placement per 1,000 children were highest for African American children (9.5), followed by Native Americans (8.8), Caucasians (3.1), Latinos (3), and Asian Americans (2). (Mech, 1992)
- African American children are less likely to exit out-of-home care, and have longer stays in out-of-home care than Caucasian children.
- Children of color experience higher re-entry rates than Caucasian children.
- Children of color experience more placement turnover in nonrelative care than Caucasian children; however, race and region interact with respect to placement stability.

Race plays a strong role in the relationship between caseworkers and clients, potentially impacting the outcomes for children in care:

- Studies indicate that clients are perceived to initiate more contact when the client and worker are of the same racial background.
- The research has demonstrated that there is a perceived greater degree of completion of treatment assignments when client and worker are of the same race.
- A caseworker is more likely to perceive the primary care giver and involved adults as more cooperative when client and caseworker are of the same race.

It is essential for child welfare agencies to recruit and hire workers who are of the same ethnicity, race and culture as client families; however, this is only the beginning of ensuring cultural responsiveness. Issues related to the worker's empathy, understanding, sensitivity, respectfulness, skill and commitment are also important to achieving culturally responsive outcomes.

IV. Philosophy

Culture is the cornerstone of identity and provides the family with a blueprint for living. Identity is integral in developing a positive self-image, self-concept and effective life skills. Family dynamics and structure are influenced by culture, which in turn, impacts parenting style and norms, and the next generation.

When children must enter foster care, they and their families are entitled to culturally sensitive, responsive, timely case reviews which address their comprehensive needs.

Cultural responsiveness is a developmental process toward which individuals, agencies and systems aspire. Each response or interaction with diverse cultures can be placed on

an infinite cultural continuum ranging from a low or nonexistent level of competence to a high level of confidence approaching proficiency. People, organizations and systems must continuously work toward achieving high levels of cultural responsiveness and sensitivity. No one ever achieves complete cultural proficiency; levels of cultural competency change with each new situation and interaction.

A highly responsive person, organization, or system is one in which practice is based on accurate perceptions of behaviors and policies are not based on the beliefs or attitudes of only one cultural group. To strive toward greater levels of cultural responsiveness, attitudes, policies and practices, as they relate to diverse cultures, must be congruent. To verify congruence, the individual, organization or system must be able to demonstrate that six elements are present. These six elements are:

1. Acknowledging and valuing diversity and uniqueness of differing cultures
2. Having the capacity for cultural self-assessment
3. Understanding and valuing the dynamics of difference: what happens when different cultures interact
4. Having a formal process for obtaining, updating and disseminating cultural knowledge
5. Having the capacity and flexibility to develop alternative strategies and methods to meet the needs of culturally diverse populations
6. Having the ability to understand another person's choices, actions and decisions in the context of his or her own culture

V. Principles of a Culturally Responsive Foster Care Review Process

The research suggests that race, culture and ethnicity are crucial determinants in the outcomes of children in foster care. By constructing services, policies and processes which are culturally responsive and sensitive, foster care review and review systems will be able to design strategies which will produce better outcomes for all children in care.

Foster care review must be designed to:

1. Respect the cultural integrity of and value the diversity and uniqueness of all children and families served, recognizing that children are part of a wider kinship network, and that culture is a cornerstone of identity and family functioning.
2. Reflect the diverse cultural presence of the children in care and their families. The review teams, foster care administration, caseworkers, training and curricula must be culturally responsive and sensitive and be multicultural in composition.

3. Set high standards of cultural responsiveness from the organizations and individuals whose work they review and for themselves.
4. Have the capacity for cultural self-assessment and strive to eliminate ethnocentric stereotypes and misunderstandings in reviewer thinking and decision-making.
5. Be flexible in approach, but adamant in goal achievement. Foster care review must develop adaptations to diversity in order to meet the needs of culturally diverse populations.
6. Identify and use cultural strengths throughout the review process.
7. Include kinship networks as partners in the review process.
8. Advocate for change in policy and/or for service/program development that meets the unique cultural needs of families.